

Section 104

Uniforms and Insignia

Identification

It was essential for men in the heat of battle to be able to recognise each other. It was also important to maintain unit loyalties and to develop an Esprit de Corps. The embodiment of this identification falls into four groups:-

- The uniform as a whole
- Devices painted on helmets
- Flashes and badges worn on sleeves.
- Cap badges

They were worn to some degree or other by all ranks, from commanding generals to the lowliest private.

The Uniform.

There were distinct differences between the uniforms of the British, French and German forces. The Americans introduced a fourth major style and the forces of the smaller nations also added distinctions. By and large the Commonwealth forces adopted the style of the British Army. This is not the place to attempt to describe the immense variety of uniforms that were worn in the First World War, Even a description of British uniforms would be out of place. We shall concern ourselves only with the uniform worn by the infantry Battalions such as the Royal Berks and the variations of insignia worn by the several Royal Berkshire Battalions during the war.

For other ranks the uniform consisted of khaki trousers and high buttoned tunic made of rough serge. There were standard issue boots and puttees with leather or webbing field equipment to enable ammunition, bayonet, food and supplies to be carried. The wide brimmed helmet had remained unchanged in look since it was introduced in 1878, but it was not proof against German bullets. In 1914 a steel version, much more effective against shrapnel was designed. This was issued on a semi-trial basis in November 1915 but this was not however general issue until 1916 when the first million had been made by June in time for the Battle of the Somme. The usual headgear at first was the flat topped service dress hat. This was quite unsuitable for trench warfare and was generally discarded in favour of the cap-comforter. In 1915 the 'gor-blimey' trench cap with ear flaps was introduced but this was soon superseded by a soft cap which could easily be folded away. Men were also issued with shirts, usually grey flannel but

occasionally khaki and most wore full woollen underwear to keep warm.

Officers wore a tailored uniform which they had to provide for themselves. It consisted of trousers and jacket made of fine khaki broadcloth, with khaki shirt and tie. Trousers tended to be baggy at the knees, rather like jodhpurs and held over the lower leg by leggings. A leather belt and straps over the shoulder provided support for a revolver. In December 1914 they were forbidden to wear Sam Browns in an assault and by 1916 officers were instructed to dress the same as their men to make it more difficult for the enemy to distinguish the officers and hence kill them first. They were then distinguishable only by the wearing of a collar and tie and by stars on their epaulettes

When the recruitment for the Kitchener battalions took off in 1914 there was an acute shortage of uniforms. As a temporary expedient many of the men were equipped with blue serge uniforms cut from cloth intended for the Post Office. Many, to their acute embarrassment, had to wear a blue smock. These later were used for prisoners of war and for convalescents.

The Royal Berkshire Regiment

The most notable insignia worn by all members of the regiment was the distinctive cap badge depicting the China Dragon. This had originated from the service of the 49th Regiment during the China Wars of 1840-42. Most also wore a shoulder badge of brass which read simply 'Royal Berks'



Cap badge of the Royal Berkshire Regiment

1st Battalion

The 1st served with the 6th and 99th Brigades of 2nd Division for all of the war. No battle insignia was worn by the 2nd Division and Regimental devices were painted on the left side of the steel helmet.

2nd Battalion

The 2nd served with the 25th Brigade of 8th Division.

25th Brigade wore square patches to indicate the brigade. The unit was denoted by colours or devices. These were worn on the upper sleeves. The 2nd wore a dragon on a 1"x1" square blue background up to November 1917 and a half inch red diagonal bar on a 2"x2" square green background from then on.

1st/4th Battalion

The 1st/4th were with 148th Brigade, 48th Division for the whole of the war. The territorials wore a curved badge with a lower pointed spur with the words 'ROYAL BERKS' within the curve and T and the battalion number in the spur. The lettering was red on a green background.

The Company was indicated on the shoulder straps by 1.75" strips of braid coloured Blue for "A", Red for "B" Yellow for "C" and Green for "D".

The 48th Division sign was a white diamond painted on the front of the helmet with the regimental badge painted on that.



Shoulder flash of 1st/4th Battalion

2nd/4th Battalion

The 2nd/4th were with 184th Brigade, 61st Division for the whole of the war.

They wore a specially embroidered shoulder patch with lettering in white on khaki. This was a semi circular style patch roughly $2 \frac{3}{16}$ " x $1 \frac{5}{16}$ " with letters $\frac{7}{16}$ " high. It was worn directly below the shoulder seams. $1 \frac{1}{2}$ " Below this was a circular patch in blue $1 \frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter. This latter was the insignia of 61st Division.



Insignia of 5th Battalion

12th Division 'Ace of Spades' on helmet and 36th Brigade square red patch between shoulder

5th Battalion

The 5th were with 35th and 36th Brigades of 12th Division throughout the war.

The regimental badge was painted on the front of their steel helmets by the 5th. A black Ace of Spades was painted on the back to indicate the 12th Division. The Ace of Spades was greeted with great suspicion whenever the 12th Division were involved with French troops as it was seen as a sign of bad-luck and used for penal battalions by them. The Ace of spades was also sewn onto the backs of the men's tunics. However one veteran of the 5th denied they had ever carried the Ace of Spades at all.

The 36th Brigade was denoted by a red patch worn on the back of tunics. The colour indicated 36th Brigade and the shape the unit, in the 5th's case this was square.

6th Battalion

The 6th were with 53rd Brigade, 18th Division until they were disbanded in February 1918.

At various times they wore sleeve patches made from regimental silks. These had a background of black with a centre stripe of white and side stripes of red. These could be cut either into oblongs (for other ranks) or inverted isocles triangles. (for officers)

7th Battalion

The 7th were with 78th Brigade, 26th Division throughout the war.

From early 1917 they wore a dark blue braid across the shoulder straps as a divisional insignia. Battalion patches were not worn in the 26th Division.

8th Battalion

They were with 1st Brigade, 1st Division until Feb 1918. After that they were with 53rd Brigade, 18th division replacing the 6th whose insignia they then wore.

While with 1st Brigade they wore a triangular patch of cloth on the back of SD jackets which was colour coded to denote their function. ie yellow for Lewis Gunners, Red for Bombers, Green for Riflemen, Black for Rifle Grenadiers.

Other Battalions.

Nothing is known of the insignia of the four labour battalions, the 10th, 11th, 12th and 13th.